

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY

EARL STEWART,

Plaintiff,

v.

CAMDEN COUNTY BOARD OF
FREEHOLDERS; CAMDEN COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS,

Defendants.

HONORABLE JEROME B. SIMANDLE

Civil Action

No. 16-cv-06233 (JBS-AMD)

OPINION

APPEARANCES:

Earl Stewart, Plaintiff Pro Se
1408 Belleview Ave.
Camden, NJ 08103

SIMANDLE, Chief District Judge:

1. Plaintiff Earl Stewart seeks to bring a civil rights complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against the Camden County Board of Freeholders ("Freeholders") and the Camden County Department of Corrections ("CCDOC"). Complaint, Docket Entry 1.

2. Section 1915(e)(2) requires a court to review complaints prior to service in cases in which a plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*. The Court must *sua sponte* dismiss any claim that is frivolous, is malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. This action is subject to *sua sponte* screening for dismissal under 28 U.S.C.

§ 1915(e)(2)(B) because Plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*.

3. For the reasons set forth below, the Court will dismiss the complaint without prejudice for failure to state a claim. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii).

4. To survive *sua sponte* screening for failure to state a claim, the complaint must allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that the claim is facially plausible. *Fowler v. UPMS Shadyside*, 578 F.3d 203, 210 (3d Cir. 2009) (citation omitted). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Fair Wind Sailing, Inc. v. Dempster*, 764 F.3d 303, 308 n.3 (3d Cir. 2014). "[A] pleading that offers 'labels or conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do.'" *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)).

5. Plaintiff brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983¹ for alleged violations of Plaintiff's constitutional

¹ Section 1983 provides: "Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State . . . subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party

rights. In order to set forth a *prima facie* case under § 1983, a plaintiff must show: "(1) a person deprived him of a federal right; and (2) the person who deprived him of that right acted under color of state or territorial law." *Groman v. Twp. of Manalapan*, 47 F.3d 628, 633 (3d Cir. 1995) (citing *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980)).

6. Generally, for purposes of actions under § 1983, "[t]he term 'persons' includes local and state officers acting under color of state law." *Carver v. Foerster*, 102 F.3d 96, 99 (3d Cir. 1996) (citing *Hafer v. Melo*, 502 U.S. 21 (1991)).² To say that a person was "acting under color of state law" means that the defendant in a § 1983 action "exercised power [that the defendant] possessed by virtue of state law and made possible only because the wrongdoer [was] clothed with the authority of state law." *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 49 (1988) (citation omitted). Generally, then, "a public employee acts under color of state law while acting in his official capacity or while exercising his responsibilities pursuant to state law." *Id.* at 50.

injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress" 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

² "Person" is not strictly limited to individuals who are state and local government employees, however. For example, municipalities and other local government units, such as counties, also are considered "persons" for purposes of § 1983. See *Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 690-91 (1978).

7. Plaintiff alleges he experienced unconstitutional conditions of confinement while detained at the Camden County Correctional Facility. Complaint § III. The fact section of the complaint states: "I was told and forced to sleep on the floor due to overcrowding situations. Cells were designed to hold two people and the Warden of the jail housed 4 people to each room." *Id.* Plaintiff further alleges that "The Board of Freeholders violated Administrative guidelines regarding the housing of pre-trial detainees." *Id.* Even accepting these statements as true for screening purposes only, there is not enough factual support for the Court to infer a constitutional violation has occurred.

8. The mere fact that an individual is lodged temporarily in a cell with more persons than its intended design does not rise to the level of a constitutional violation. *See Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 348-50 (1981) (holding double-celling by itself did not violate Eighth Amendment); *Carson v. Mulvihill*, 488 F. App'x 554, 560 (3d Cir. 2012) ("[M]ere double-bunking does not constitute punishment, because there is no 'one man, one cell principle lurking in the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment.'" (quoting *Bell v. Wolfish*, 441 U.S. 520, 542 (1979))). More is needed to demonstrate that such crowded conditions, for a pretrial detainee, shocks the conscience and thus violates due process rights. *See Hubbard v. Taylor*, 538 F.3d 229, 233 (3d Cir. 2008) (noting due process analysis

requires courts to consider whether the totality of the conditions "cause[s] inmates to endure such genuine privations and hardship over an extended period of time, that the adverse conditions become excessive in relation to the purposes assigned to them."). Some relevant factors are the dates and length of the confinement(s), whether Plaintiff was a pretrial detainee or convicted prisoner, etc.

9. Moreover, Plaintiff has not alleged sufficient facts to support an inference that the named Defendants are personally liable for the alleged constitutional violations.

10. First, the CCDOC is not independently subject to suit because it is not a separate legal entity from Camden County. *See Bermudez v. Essex Cty. D.O.C.*, No. 12-6035, 2013 WL 1405263, at *5 (D.N.J. Apr. 4, 2013) (citing cases). Plaintiff has not pled sufficient facts to impose liability on Camden County.

11. "There is no *respondeat superior* theory of municipal liability, so a city may not be held vicariously liable under § 1983 for the actions of its agents. Rather, a municipality may be held liable only if its policy or custom is the 'moving force' behind a constitutional violation." *Sanford v. Stiles*, 456 F.3d 298, 314 (3d Cir. 2006) (citing *Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978)). *See also Collins v. City of Harker Heights*, 503 U.S. 115, 122 (1992) ("The city is not vicariously liable under § 1983 for the constitutional

torts of its agents: It is only liable when it can be fairly said that the city itself is the wrongdoer.").

12. Plaintiff must plead facts showing that the relevant Camden County policy-makers are "responsible for either the affirmative proclamation of a policy or acquiescence in a well-settled custom." *Bielewicz v. Dubinon*, 915 F.2d 845, 850 (3d Cir. 1990).³ In other words, Plaintiff must set forth facts supporting an inference that Camden County itself was the "moving force" behind the alleged constitutional violation. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 689. Plaintiff has not alleged any such facts.

13. Likewise, Plaintiff has not pled sufficient facts regarding the personal liability of the Freeholders. As the governing body of Camden County, the Freeholders also cannot be held liable under § 1983 solely on a theory of *respondeat superior*. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 690-91. Plaintiff therefore must meet the same pleading standard regarding the Freeholder's liability as must be met for Camden County, *i.e.*, he must set

³ "Policy is made when a decisionmaker possess[ing] final authority to establish municipal policy with respect to the action issues an official proclamation, policy, or edict. Government custom can be demonstrated by showing that a given course of conduct, although not specifically endorsed or authorized by law, is so well-settled and permanent as virtually to constitute law." *Kirkland v. DiLeo*, 581 F. App'x 111, 118 (3d Cir. 2014) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (alteration in original).

forth facts supporting an inference that the Freeholders themselves were the "moving force" behind the alleged constitutional violations. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 689. Plaintiff's cursory allegation that the "Freeholders violated Administrative guidelines regarding the housing of pre-trial detainees," without more, is insufficient to show that the Freeholders are "responsible for either the affirmative proclamation of a policy or acquiescence in a well-settled custom." *Bielewicz*, 915 F.2d at 850.

14. As Plaintiff may be able to amend his complaint to address the deficiencies noted by the Court, the Court shall grant Plaintiff leave to amend the complaint within 30 days of the date of this order.

15. Plaintiff should note that when an amended complaint is filed, the original complaint no longer performs any function in the case and cannot be utilized to cure defects in the amended complaint, unless the relevant portion is specifically incorporated in the new complaint. 6 Wright, Miller & Kane, Federal Practice and Procedure 1476 (2d ed. 1990) (footnotes omitted). An amended complaint may adopt some or all of the allegations in the original complaint, but the identification of the particular allegations to be adopted must be clear and

explicit. *Id.* To avoid confusion, the safer course is to file an amended complaint that is complete in itself.⁴ *Id.*

16. For the reasons stated above, the complaint is dismissed without prejudice for failure to state a claim. The Court will reopen the matter in the event Plaintiff files an amended complaint within the time allotted by the Court.

17. An appropriate order follows.

March 15, 2017
Date

s/ Jerome B. Simandle
JEROME B. SIMANDLE
Chief U.S. District Judge

⁴ The amended complaint shall be subject to screening prior to service.